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ABSTRACT

A study was made of the state of apprenticeship in France, using data gathered through telephone interviews with apprentices. Of a targeted group of 6,000 young apprentices, 70% participated in the survey. The study found that, until recently, apprenticeships had generally been used in France to train students in manual trades. During the past 10 years, legislation has been passed to expand apprenticeships to other youths, but change has been slow. At least three of four apprentices are still involved with traditional apprenticeship (artisanal enterprises or small businesses). A new form of apprenticeship has been emerging in the 1990s. With the expansion of apprenticeship to all diploma levels, the range of host companies was expanded. New segments of industry, such as consulting firms, hotel chains, and mass marketing firms have begun to offer apprenticeships to young people preparing for a baccalaureate degree or beyond. Schools provide the theoretical educational component of these apprenticeships, whereas the industries provide the practical training. Although this type of apprenticeship is still at an experimental stage, and the number of companies involved is still very limited, it is popular with students and is growing in importance. (KC)

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APPRENTICESHIP IN FRANCE: BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

Even a few years ago, apprenticeship was still mainly reserved for young people preparing themselves for manual trades in companies that were for the most part non-industrial. But since then, apprenticeship has gone beyond its traditional limits. It now serves to prepare for all the technical and vocational diplomas and is open to all occupations and kinds of companies.

France favours the school-based approach for the vocational training of its young people and reserves a small role for the companies in this area. In this respect, apprenticeship, which is a form of alternating training under an employment contract, occupies a particular place in the initial training system. Until the 1980s, it mainly involved young people who, from the age of 16, were preparing for a vocational aptitude certificate (CAP) in order to practice a manual trade in companies that were for the most part non-industrial. About 200,000 young people were trained in this way every year.

This traditional form of apprenticeship has its advocates and its critics. For the former, it permits the acquisition of the technical and relational know-how desired by the companies. For the latter, it does not permit the acquisition of the general education and basic knowledge that are indispensable for adapting to new techniques and work environments. Without entering into these debates, it appears that in terms of immediate effectiveness, until the early 1990s, young people trained through apprenticeship were more successful in making the school-to-work transition than those trained for the same occupations in vocational high schools.

Young people are encountering increasing difficulties at the beginning of working life, especially when they enter the labour market without qualification or with a qualification that is little recognised by the companies. In this context, apprenticeship, and, more broadly, alternating training, have attracted particular attention over the past decade among government officials and employers' organisations. In 1987 this gave rise to concrete legal measures aimed at not only encouraging apprenticeship but also updating it by extending it to diplomas beyond the CAP,[1] in line with the general trend towards a higher level of studies.

1. Certificate of vocational competence and the two or three-year-course leading to it.

The first significant change concerned the new vocational *baccalauréat* and the higher technician certificate (BTS). But an additional step was taken with the decision to train engineers through such a system. However, this radical transformation of the traditional image of apprenticeship presumed its expansion to new groups of young people and above all to new kinds of companies. Several vigourous public-relations campaigns and the introduction of financial incentives for the companies served to reinforce the political determination to extend and upgrade apprenticeship.

Nearly ten years after the promulgation of this law, apprenticeship is gradually assuming a new position in France. The changes are real, but slow. It was not until 1993 that a clear rise in the number of new apprentices could be observed (See "In Focus"). At the same time, the proportion of those preparing for a diploma beyond the CAP has shown a steady increase but does not exceed 20 percent. Similarly, a new kind of host company has emerged over the years, but those belonging to the traditional sectors for apprenticeship are still clearly in the majority.

In order to arrive at a better understanding of the effects of these changes, Céreq conducted a survey on the in-company apprenticeship experience among six thousand apprentices of all levels (see Box p. 4). The remarks that follow are based on the preliminary results of this survey, which was carried out during the first quarter of 1996. They bring out the coexistence of two very distinct types of apprenticeship. Indeed, alongside a traditional apprenticeship that remains very hardy, it is possible to trace the emergence of a new form of alternating training under an employment contract.

NEW PROFILES, NEW HOPES

Opting for training through apprenticeship means breaking with the school-based model but above all entering a real

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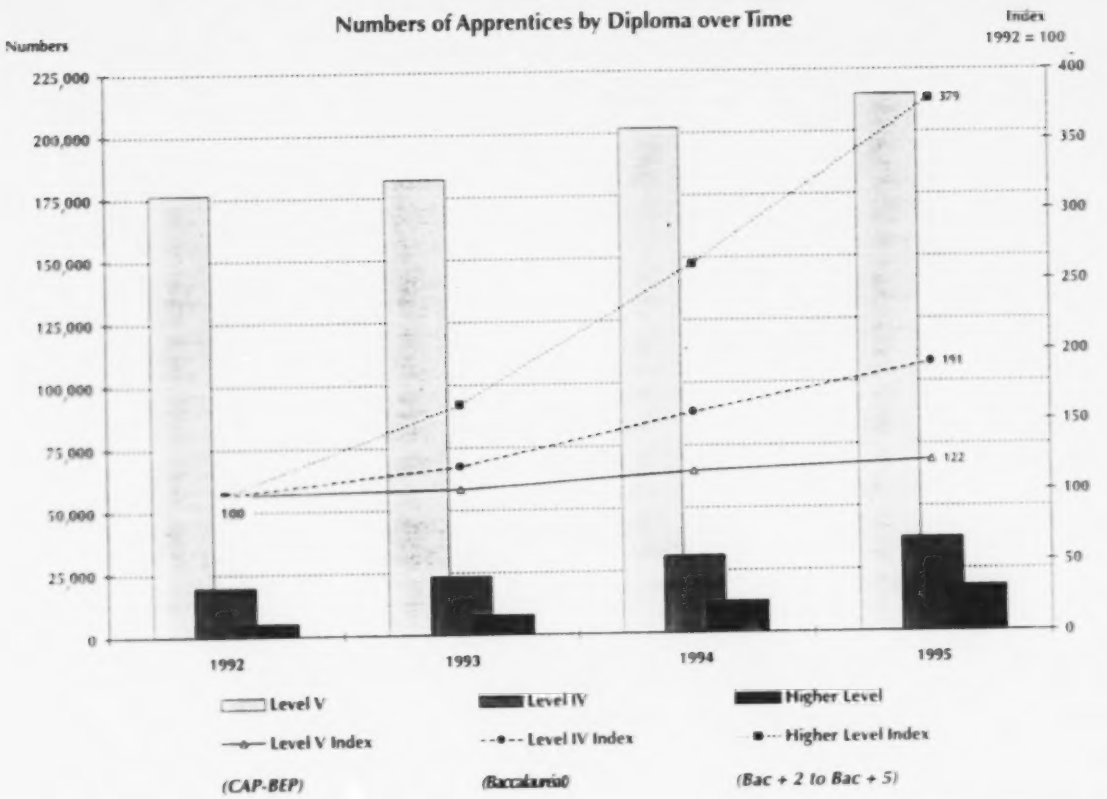

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work situation by signing an employment contract. This also marks the beginning of financial autonomy. In return, the apprentice must integrate into an adult work community, adapt to working conditions and hours, and learn to produce. Whatever their previous level of study, most of the apprentices do not regret abandoning the school-based approach. In France, where general education is highly regarded, this observation must be emphasised. However, depending on the point at which the young people interrupt their schooling, the reasons that lead them to express themselves so positively differ.

Thus, those who orient themselves (or are oriented) towards apprenticeship before the end of high school have an itinerary that is often marked by academic difficulties. Entering this training stream at that stage is often seen by the school as a last resort. But for the young people themselves, it represents above all a second chance, another way of training themselves and acquiring a trade. By contrast, those who come to apprenticeship after completing high school tend to see it as a means of discovering the realities of the company and obtaining a first work experience. "This is what will make the difference in comparison with other recent graduates," one of them explains. In this case, apprenticeship does not constitute an alternative to school-based learning but rather a means of transition before the definitive entry into the labour market.

TRADITIONAL APPRENTICESHIP STILL GOING STRONG

At least three out of four apprentices are involved with traditional apprenticeship. The term applies to the form that occurs in artisanal enterprises (i.e., small productive structures belonging to very precise activity sectors such as construction, foodstuffs, auto repair, or hairdressing), but also in small retail businesses and the hotel-catering trade. These companies, where the economic activity and occupation are basically the same, receive the large majority of the young people preparing for a Level V vocational diploma. But they are also gradually coming to participate in the training of young people who, sometimes following a first apprenticeship, attempt to obtain a Level IV diploma.

Several other elements allow us to delineate traditional apprenticeship. The means of access to the company, for example, tend to be based on geographical proximity and networks of acquaintances. The family and personal relations, rather than institutional networks, are mobilised in order to find an apprenticeship master. The search, which is in general short term, preferably takes place in an area close to home. In some cases, the fact of finding an employer will even guide the choice of the future speciality.

Furthermore, in traditional apprenticeship young people are quite aware of the company's role in training. This recognition is closely related to the role accorded to the appren-

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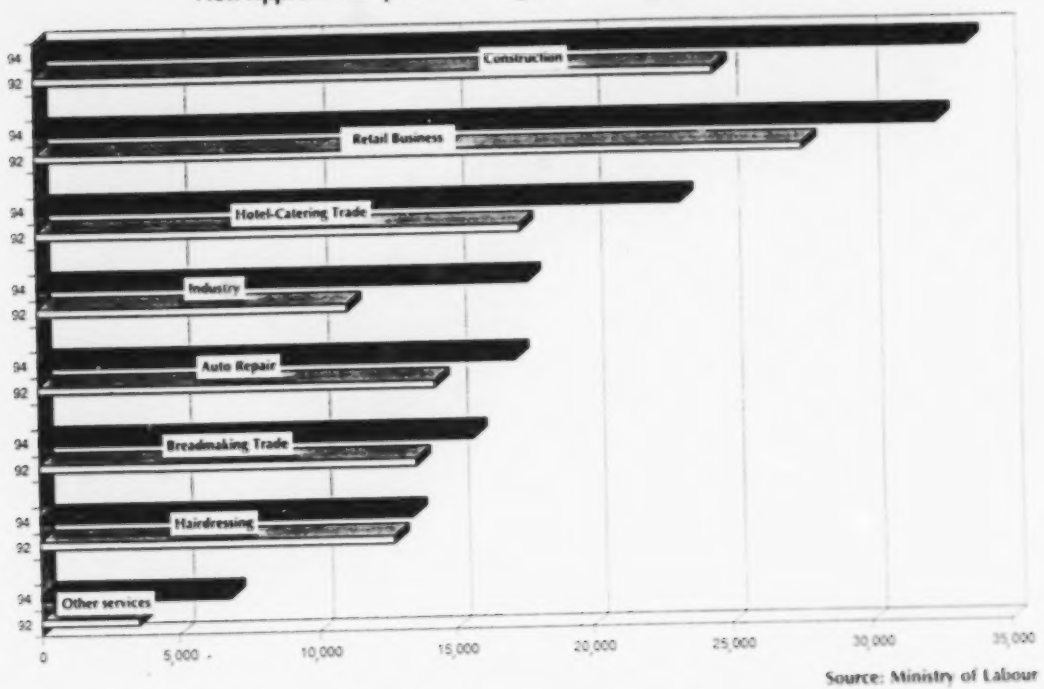
New Apprenticeship Contracts signed in 1992 and 1994 by Sector



Source: Ministry of Labour

ticeship master. In this kind of company where the work collective is most often reduced to a few individuals, the masters are frequently the "boss." Their role is decisive. The masters' investment relative to the apprentice and their interest in the training within the company as well in the preparation for the exam will in large part determine the image that young people restore to apprenticeship.

This human-relations dimension plays a very important role in the building of the young people's professional identity. In this respect, the apprentice training centre (*centre de formation d'apprentis*, CFA) where young people spend an average of one week a month, enjoys a less positive image. And yet, the young people consider that the work carried out in the training centre (outside of general training) is close to that in the company. The relations between the centre and the apprenticeship master are, moreover, fairly impersonal and often reduced to the filling out of the "liaison record."

In traditional apprenticeship, young people are assigned to work stations that often entail tasks which they consider physically uncomfortable (only 12 % do not feel themselves involved by this kind of task). Many of them, for example, indicate that they carry heavy objects or remain in tiring positions for long periods of time. The discomfort is cited in retail trade and hairdressing but is experienced particularly in the construction, hotel-catering, breadmaking-pastry, and auto repair trades, where several types of discomfort are combined. In addition, certain factors of discomfort are related not to the tasks themselves but to the work environment: nearly half of the apprentices state that they are exposed to heat, cold, noise or dust. For many of them, this is compounded by the fact of working overtime and for some, Sundays, notably in the breadmaking-pastry and hotel-catering trades.

Perhaps because they are inadequately informed of the work conditions particular to certain sectors, one-quarter of the apprentices preparing for a Level V diploma do not complete their contract, and among these, two out of three definitively abandon this training stream. Dropping out during the contract is much less frequent among those who are preparing for a Level IV diploma, notably when they have completed a first apprenticeship. This group has probably already integrated the work conditions particular to the occupation for which they are being trained.

In traditional apprenticeship, 80 percent of the companies regularly train apprentices. But the prospects for remaining in the company after the apprenticeship are slim for young people preparing for a Level V diploma. Only 20 percent of the apprenticeship masters evoke this possibility with the young person. Thus, in spite of the fact that apprenticeship is aimed at training young people who are immediately operational, the fear of unemployment may lead them to postpone their entry into the labour market: 40 percent of them would like to enter another training cycle following the first apprenticeship.

By contrast, companies that train young people preparing for a Level IV diploma more frequently envision hiring them after the apprenticeship. The companies' higher standards for hiring on the one hand and the young peoples' fear of unemployment on the other are factors favouring the creation of a veritable training stream within traditional apprenticeship. Nonetheless, given the qualifications needs and the training capacity of the companies, it is hardly likely that this stream will develop beyond Level IV. Moreover, most of the young people involved envision a definitive transition to work after obtaining this diploma.

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THE 1990s, OR THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW FORM OF APPRENTICESHIP

The first consequence of the extension of apprenticeship to all diploma levels was that the range of host companies was expanded. The large industrial companies, for example, some of which had broken with the practice of alternating training used in the company schools, now offer places for apprenticeship. Another result of the upgrading of apprenticeship is the interest that this kind of contract has generated in new segments of the tertiary, such as financial bodies, consulting firms, hotel chains, and mass marketing.

But this diversification of the host structures and forms of work organisation has relatively little benefit for young people preparing for the lowest-level diplomas. The apprenticeship contracts offered by these companies are addressed rather at young people preparing for the vocational *baccalauréat* (Level IV) or beyond. But above all, these companies receive practically all the young people preparing for a BTS or a technical institute diploma (DUT) (Level III), an engineering degree, a data processing masters, or a chartered accountant diploma (Level II or I).

When they undertake such an activity, the companies often receive several apprentices at the same time. The company head rarely assumes the role of apprenticeship master, which is entrusted instead to an employee in a supervisory position. The young person is thus integrated into a work team composed of several people. For this reason, but also because the apprentices are older and thus less likely to identify with a model, the role of apprenticeship master is more modest than in traditional apprenticeship. In particular, the master intervenes much less in the monitoring of the apprentice's academic progress.

In traditional apprenticeship the execution of new tasks is based above all on the reproduction of gesture; here, the apprentices enjoy much greater autonomy. Instructions are transmitted orally, and the apprentice chooses how to execute the assigned task with the help of aids such as plans or notes. Another major difference with traditional apprenticeship, where the apprentice mainly uses hand tools, is that the most frequent tool is the computer.

The division of roles between the company and the training centre is much clearer. The centre (where, on the average, the apprentice spends as much time as in the company) deals with theory; the company, with the learning of the trade. Relations between the centre and the apprenticeship master are also more frequent and more formalised. They take the form of personalised exchanges and visits to the workplaces. The young person's arrival at the company, for example, is often preceded by a discussion in order to define the details of the apprenticeship. This is much less common in traditional apprenticeship. But the increased involvement on the part of the centre must be considered in relation to the number of companies involved. If the latter were to increase, would the centres be able to maintain their support at the same level?

Indeed, this kind of apprenticeship is still at an experimental stage, and the number of companies involved is still very limited. Apart from access to the company network of certain centres, moreover, the search for a host company often resembles a real job hunt. The procedures are lengthy, and it is frequently necessary to contact several dozen companies. But it is also true that the future apprentices try to put themselves in the position of choosing the company with which they will sign the apprenticeship contract. This active, selective behaviour is all the more important insofar as the young peoples' goal in this kind of apprenticeship is either to be hired by the company at the end of the contract (and the more advanced the diploma involved, the more often this is the case), or to make use of the apprenticeship period as a first work experience when subsequently contacting potential employers.

Nonetheless, as with traditional apprenticeship, a training stream specific to this kind of apprenticeship is beginning to emerge. For the time being, it mainly attracts young people preparing for a vocational *baccalauréat* (Level IV). For 40 percent of them, this diploma constitutes a first experience with alternating training, which they would like to continue in the context of another apprenticeship contract in order to obtain a Level III diploma.

Georgie Simon-Zarca

THE SURVEY

This article is based on the initial results of a national survey conducted during the first three months of 1996 on a sampling of six thousand young people who signed an apprenticeship contract in 1994. The main objective of the survey was to examine an aspect of apprenticeship that has been little explored until now—apprenticeship in the work situation (the place reserved for the apprentice in the work system, the involvement of the apprenticeship master, work conditions, job hasards, follow-up of the young person in the company by the apprenticeship training centre, etc.). These different issues were taken up with the apprentices during telephone interviews lasting an average of thirty minutes. At the time of the inquiry, most of them had not yet completed their apprenticeship.
All diploma levels are represented. Given the sharp disparity in the numbers involved, the sample was established by level with variable polling rates: 1/40 for Level V apprentices (CAP-BEP), 1/10 for Level IV (vocational certificate-vocational baccalauréat*), 1/3 for Level III (BTS-DUT), and all of the Level II apprentices (engineering degree, data-processing masters, chartered accountant diplomas). There was a 70 percent rate of response.*

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